

Seeing Green

*The Use and Abuse of
American Environmental Images*

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THIRTEEN

Meryl Streep, the Alar Crisis, and the Rise of Green Consumerism

In 1989, Meryl Streep became an environmental celebrity. It was an unusual role for the "intensely private actress," who had always sought to keep her family out of the limelight and had refused to become, in her words, "celebrity junk food." Streep took on this role after learning that the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) had completed a report documenting the presence of carcinogenic chemicals in the nation's food supply. "When I read this report," Streep explained, "the evidence was so stunning and compelling that all my reticence about getting involved went away. . . . I'm not just concerned; I'm furious! I'm in the position to give my children anything they want, but I can't provide them with wholesome food. Something's fundamentally wrong." Streep agreed to become the spokesperson for an NRDC campaign to publicize the risks of pesticides and chemicals applied to food, especially the danger of Alar-laced apples consumed by young children. Like many environmental activists before her, Streep sought to merge the private and public realms by bringing parental feelings into politics.¹

For the NRDC, Streep's participation promised to heighten the visibility of the campaign, to confer additional newsworthiness on Alar through the presence of the revered actress. From Dr. Spock warning about radioactive fallout to Jane Fonda protesting nuclear power and Robert

Redford promoting solar energy, celebrities had long been involved in popular environmentalism and had helped bring media attention to various campaigns. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, though, the phenomenon of celebrity environmentalism—especially among Hollywood stars—became a media story in its own right. As *People Weekly* noted in 1990, "every peril on the planet seems to have acquired a star to call its own." Streep's role in the NRDC campaign arguably marked the most successful example of a movie star influencing environmental politics: Three months after she entered the environmental spotlight, Alar would be removed from the US market, thus protecting consumers from its menacing toxicity.²

The interplay between Streep's public image and private life, between her star power and status as a concerned mother made her the ideal spokesperson for the NRDC campaign. Throughout the 1980s, media coverage of Streep emphasized her effort to combine career with motherhood: she was "Magic Meryl," "the most-sought-after actress in Hollywood," but also "a working mother on a grand scale" who "simply will not sacrifice her family life for career." By becoming a spokesperson for the NRDC, Streep demonstrated concern for her children's health by entering the public realm as an environmental activist.³

Streep began playing this part in conjunction with the NRDC's release of *Intolerable Risk: Pesticides in Our Children's Food*. Although the report examined over twenty different chemicals used in agriculture, one specific claim was extracted by the NRDC and emphasized by the news media: *Intolerable Risk* identified Alar, the trade name of the chemical Daminozide, as "the greatest source of cancer risk" and warned that "apple products, including fresh apples, apple sauce and apple juice" exposed children to dangerous quantities of this carcinogen.⁴

In the NRDC campaign, the emphasis on the vulnerable bodies of children attracted considerable media attention but reduced the issue to a single chemical applied on a single fruit rather than to systemic questions about the environmental hazards of industrial agriculture. Streep's performance as a real-life mother and political activist shows how the mass media offered an arena in which environmentalists could contest the conservative effort to deregulate industry by mobilizing popular fears about toxic chemicals. Yet this campaign also revealed the difficulty of presenting and circulating alternative visions of the future, scenarios that moved beyond isolated instances of reform to imagine large-scale reductions of toxicity. The Alar campaign thus indicated the limits of the environmentalist engagement with the mass media. Too often, the movement itself became a kind of consumerist

spectacle, using fear to focus public attention on specific hazards, but failing to communicate more far-reaching ways to confront the proliferating presence of toxins in the environment and in people's bodies. The Alar crisis generated a sense of urgency, made this particular chemical seem uniquely threatening, but ignored systemic critiques of industrial agriculture as well as radical proposals to reduce the escalating production of toxicity.

The Alar campaign also marked a pivotal moment in the history of green consumerism. Streep and the NRDC positioned consumers, especially the young, as the prime victims of pesticide exposure. The campaign sought to mobilize parental concern to demand that the US government protect its youngest citizens from the perils of Alar and other toxic agents in food. Alar's demise, though, came not from government action but rather from the decision of its manufacturer—responding to public concern and declining apple sales—to banish it from the US market. If American consumers were victims, they also seemed, in this case at least, to be neoliberal agents of change, using their purchasing decisions to alter corporate policy and create a healthier environment. This popular vision of environmentalism denied power relations and exaggerated the ability of individual economic actors to shape corporate priorities and patterns of resource use. Presenting the market as a realm of freedom where consumers could redirect production decisions by choosing to buy or not buy particular items, green consumerism seemingly became synonymous with political empowerment.

On the evening before the release of *Intolerable Risk*, CBS's respected news program *60 Minutes* aired a story titled "A is for Apple." Seated before a backdrop image of a shiny red apple superimposed with a skull and crossbones (fig. 13.1), the correspondent Ed Bradley began ominously: "The most potent cancer-causing agent in our food supply is a substance sprayed on apples to keep them on the trees longer and make them look better. . . . And who is most at risk? Children, who may someday develop cancer from being exposed to this product."⁵

The *60 Minutes* story had been arranged by Fenton Communications, a public relations firm hired by the NRDC. David Fenton, founder and CEO of the firm, explained that the campaign specifically targeted television and other visual media. "Usually," he observed, "public interest groups release similar reports by holding a news conference, and the result is a few print stories. Television coverage is rarely sought or achieved." Fenton wanted to heighten the visual dimensions of the Alar story to generate an "intensity of exposure" that would be



FIGURE 13.1. "A is for Apple." Frame capture from CBS television news program *60 Minutes*, 1989.

"uncommon in the non-profit world." "The symbolic appeal of the thought of apples as a threat to children," he believed, would provide the public with a compelling and easily comprehended image of environmental danger. As the *60 Minutes* background indicated, Alar drew upon cultural meanings associated with Snow White's poisoned apple. The shiny surface of Alar-laced products concealed their carcinogenic qualities; just as the wicked queen offered Snow White a deadly apple, Alar threatened children with its invisible toxicity.⁶

Fenton not only designed the campaign with these visual and cultural symbols in mind but also staged the release of the NRDC report to maximize media exposure. He granted *60 Minutes* the right to "break" the story of the report in late February,⁷ just before it was given to other media outlets. He scheduled interviews "with major women's magazines like *Family Circle*, *Women's Day* and *Redbook*." He also arranged for Streep, whose participation he described as an "essential element" in the campaign, to appear on *The Donahue Show* and other daytime programs. "Our goal was to create so many repetitions of NRDC's message that average American consumers . . . could not avoid hearing it—

from many different media outlets within a short period of time," he explained. "The idea was for the 'story' to achieve a life of its own, and continue for weeks and months to affect policy and consumer habits." Fenton's strategy, then, relied not just on the power of visual media to create evocative images but also on harnessing media temporality to generate a sense of urgency, to galvanize public concern through repeated exposure on TV, popular magazines, and other media forms. If the NRDC had not hired Fenton to orchestrate the campaign, the Alar crisis may never have happened.⁷

While the NRDC report primarily consisted of charts, tables, and scientific analysis, *60 Minutes* visualized and dramatized the Alar issue. As one commentator later remarked, "It seems noteworthy . . . that nowhere between the covers of [*Intolerable Risk*] is there a red delicious apple emblazoned with a skull and crossbones." The *60 Minutes* piece began with that image and then explained how the EPA's failure to deal with Alar in a timely fashion cast broader doubts upon its own effectiveness as the nation's designated protector of ecological bodies. Indeed, by the time the NRDC released *Intolerable Risk*, EPA studies had confirmed that Alar exceeded the government's tolerance limits for carcinogenic chemicals. Nevertheless, even as it acknowledged this risk, the agency claimed that laws forbade it from removing Alar from the market immediately. In one interview, Bradley challenged an EPA administrator for his agency's foot-dragging. Later in the episode, Janet Hathaway of the NRDC chastised the government: "If EPA doesn't think that the most potent cancer-causing chemical in our food supply is grounds enough to declare it an imminent hazard and remove it from food, well, I don't know what kind of risk it takes then to declare an imminent chemical hazard." The *60 Minutes* report helped the NRDC create a sense of urgency about banning Alar from the food supply.⁸

Yet the spectacle of risk generated by the broadcast—and by subsequent media coverage of the Alar crisis—did not accurately convey the long-term, accretive modes of danger emphasized by the *Intolerable Risk* report. In preparing the study, NRDC scientists used a "time-dependent model to estimate risk," a methodology that factored in the "long latency period" of toxins. The NRDC selected children's bodies as the focus of the study for both symbolic and scientific reasons. Fusing fact with feeling, cognition with emotion, the report deployed the trope of childhood vulnerability and examined the "lifetime cancer risk" posed by various chemicals. "Preschool children are receiving hazardous exposures to pesticides at the time when they are likely to

be most susceptible to the toxic effects of these compounds," the report explained. The accumulating hazard of toxins in the human body would eventually result, the NRDC argued, in thousands of additional cancer cases during the lifetimes of Americans who were then the nation's youngest citizens. The NRDC projected an extensive time frame of risk to warn of the long-term effects of toxicity. If the government did not take action by banning Alar, then today's apple-juice-drinking children would—at some point in their lifetimes—face an increased cancer risk.⁹

The *60 Minutes* report heightened the sense of danger by condensing time, framing Alar as an immediate risk to the vulnerable bodies of children. In one interview, Representative Gerald Sikorski, a Democrat from Minnesota, asked viewers to envision childhood cancer sufferers in relation to the Alar debate. "Go to a cancer ward in any children's hospital in this country," he said, "and see the bald, wasting-away kids and then make a decision whether the risks balance over the benefits." The camera then showed images of children drinking apple juice. Together, the interview and visuals posited a causal relationship between Alar and childhood cancer to deliver a frightening warning about the carcinogenic dangers lurking in their cups.

Soon after this broadcast, Streep appeared at a news conference and on *Today*, *Donahue*, and other popular daytime TV shows to announce the founding of Mothers and Others for Pesticide Limits as an offshoot of the NRDC. She also starred in two of the group's three TV commercials. In all these roles, Streep emphasized the role of mothers in protecting their children from harm. In one commercial she wears an apron and stands with a boy as they wash broccoli together (fig. 13.2). "The government says we should wash all our fruits and vegetables for two to three minutes," Streep states, followed by a meaningful pause. "With detergent. And then rinse them. Why? What's on the food? And why are children particularly at risk?" Another NRDC spot shows a succession of individual children eating fruits and vegetables in their high chairs. As the children appear on screen, the narrator lists various pesticides whose residues the children will presumably soon ingest and then asks, "Who invited them to dinner?"¹⁰

Streep, according to a quantitative analysis of media coverage, became "the most newsworthy figure in the Alar controversy," the individual most often quoted and discussed by the media. After the press conference and the release of the NRDC commercials, Streep testified in a Congressional hearing. Her comments, a CBS news broadcast claimed, "seemed to sum it all up." Streep asked the committee, "Are we



FIGURE 13.2. Meryl Streep and child. Frame capture from television advertisement by Mothers and Others for Pesticide Limits and National Resources Defense Council, 1989.

not allowed to know what's on the food? That's what's so distressing." She also visited the White House, hoping, as *People Weekly* reported, "to stop a bitter harvest" by "plead[ing] her case" with a Bush administration official.¹¹

While the NRDC reached well beyond the issue of Alar on apples to consider a plethora of toxic chemicals in the food supply, the specific topic of Alar would be amplified in the popular media. The focus on Alar helped render visible the invisible threat of this particular chemical, but also obscured the other forms of slow violence directed against human bodies and ecological systems. NRDC director John H. Adams described the Alar campaign a "'one chemical at a time' strategy," an effort to publicize the danger of a specific substance. This emphasis narrowed discussion about the widespread presence of pesticides in agriculture to such questions as whether the government should ban Alar immediately and whether parents should allow their children to keep drinking apple juice.¹²

Indeed, throughout much of March 1989, TV news and other media dramatized the Alar issue, often reducing the larger pesticide debate to the following question posed by a CBS news report: "Are apples a

health risk to children?" School districts across the nation—including those in New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles, as well as in hundreds of smaller cities and towns—answered affirmatively, as they decided to remove all apple juice and apple products from their school cafeterias.¹³

The apple soon became a contested symbol. Senator Joseph Lieberman, a Democrat from Connecticut, evoked biblical imagery as he decried the use of Alar: "If I may say so, not since the Garden of Eden has the apple caused such an uproar in our world." Just as Streep explicitly linked her status as a nurturing mother to the NRDC campaign, Lieberman deployed similar language to express his parental concern about Alar's potential effect on his young daughter. "Like many Americans, my wife and I . . . were shocked" by the *60 Minutes* story, he explained. "We went to our food cabinets and . . . threw out all the applesauce and apple juice we could find." In contrast, Steve Symms, a Republican from Idaho, demonstrated his complete confidence in the safety of American apples and urged everyone to "join me in eating an apple." In a dramatic gesture played back that night on TV news, he took a large bite out of a red apple while standing on the Senate floor.¹⁴

Consumer Reports magazine soon joined the debate by publishing a cover story that also evoked Snow White iconography (fig. 13.3). The magazine's intervention marked a departure from its tendency to act as "a buying guide to consumer durables." For its Alar story, *Consumer Reports* conducted an extensive study of apples and apple products and reported, with considerable dismay, that a large sample available in supermarkets contained high residues of Alar. In presenting its findings the magazine, like the NRDC, reaffirmed the right of consumers to increased protection from toxic threats. Republican Senator Slade Gorton denounced *Consumer Reports* for what he viewed as its deceptive use of apple symbolism that promoted the NRDC campaign: "A shiny red apple," he said, describing the magazine's cover image, "held by a maccabre, black-fingernailed hand—the classic portrait of a wicked witch luring an innocent child to poison—all under the huge, red headline: 'Bad Apples.'"¹⁵

It would become a staple among the conservative media that the Alar crisis demonstrated the triumph of emotion over reason, hysteria over science. Soon after the NRDC released *Intolerable Risk*, the *Wall Street Journal* lambasted the study as another in a series of "witchcraft tales that have been drummed into the American psyche . . . by environmental groups." In much of this coverage, Streep would be derided as a hysterical woman who had no business addressing the public about scientific matters. The *Wall Street Journal* described Streep as "actress-



FIGURE 13.3. *Consumer Reports* magazine cover, May 1989. Copyright 1989 by Consumers Union of U.S., Inc., Yonkers, NY 10703-1057, a nonprofit organization. Reprinted with permission from the May 1989 issue of *Consumer Reports* for educational purposes only. No commercial use or reproduction permitted. www.ConsumerReports.org.

turned-toxicologist," clearly questioning her credibility and implicitly mocking her audience, composed largely of women, whom she addressed in "a string of talk-show appearances" in which she spread "public anxiety." Using the gender-inflected notion of hysteria, the *Wall Street Journal* and other conservative sources chastised Streep and claimed that media spectacles of crisis worked to benefit the NRDC.¹⁶

Media attention did contribute to the rejection of the chemical. As apples sales declined across the United States later that spring, Uniuoyal, the manufacturer of Alar, decided to remove it from the market. One commentator explained, "Parents were not inclined to argue about how much Alar was tolerable; they wanted *none* of it in apples, and Uniuoyal responded by an action to ensure exactly that." The emphasis on vulnerable bodies and threats to innocent children tarnished the reputation of Alar and buttressed the call for increased protection of citizen consumers. For the NRDC, then, the campaign resulted in a major victory: apples would no longer be laced with Alar, the chemical the group assailed as the most carcinogenic substance in the nation's food supply.¹⁷

In the aftermath of the Alar crisis, chemical industry leaders and right-wing commentators would repeatedly claim that the controversy demonstrated the failings of "our nation's environmentalism: an emotional reaction that's based on misinformation, disinformation and the faulty use of statistics." The entire episode, they argued, revealed the threat to reason and rational policy making posed by "movie stars brandishing pseudo-science and manipulating the media to dictate what we eat." Much like the conservative reaction to *The China Syndrome* and the Three Mile Island crisis, these industry spokespersons and right-wing pundits framed the Alar crisis as an example of environmental alarmism duping the media and the American public to fall prey to the movement's dubious claims and phony hysteria. Once again, they complained, image had trumped reality: media spectacle had colonized the domain of rational deliberation to produce a celebrity-dominated, overly emotional public sphere.¹⁸

Yet, even if the mass media contributed to the cessation of Alar's use, these same reports also obscured broader criticisms of the contemporary agricultural system. Rather than viewing the Alar episode in the dualistic terms of emotion versus reason, spectacle versus science, and image versus reality, we need instead to consider how the "one chemical at a time" strategy mobilized public concern over this specific substance but also worked to deflect attention from the long-term systemic problems associated with industrial agriculture, including the escalating use of pesticides. Indeed, in *Intolerable Risk* and other reports, the NRDC sought to promote long-term solutions to reduce pesticide use and proposed new policies to encourage a large-scale "transition from chemical-intensive agriculture to innovative, safer farming techniques." These measures included providing "growers with . . . financial

protection" to "help ease the transition" to organic farming methods. NRDC reports also called for "a tax on pesticides" to "fund research and demonstration projects in alternative, low-chemical farming." While the NRDC thus envisioned major policy initiatives to foster a transformation in US agriculture, these proposals were completely ignored or dismissed in media coverage of Alar.¹⁹

To take a prime example, in an episode of the ABC news program *Nightline*, the host Ted Koppel seemed relatively sympathetic to the NRDC argument about removing Alar from the market quickly. Yet Koppel also framed the larger issue of pesticide use in a remarkably reductionist manner, warning that if farmers stopped using pesticides, then Americans could end up finding "worms in tomato sauce and insects in bread." In an interview with a NRDC leader, Koppel refers to the industrialization of agriculture over the past century and then asks her: "Would you pick the way things were 100 years ago or now?" When she refuses to take the bait and tries to offer a more complex response to his simplistic question, he interrupts her: "I want you to say what you don't want to admit—that things are better now." The episode foreclosed any meaningful discussion of alternatives to the current food system. *Nightline*, like other media broadcasts, elevated a moderate vision of reform but rejected more ambitious proposals developed by proponents of organic agriculture and sustainable farming. While Koppel agreed that Alar should be banned, the larger system of industrial agriculture, including its ever-increasing reliance on a battery of pesticides, went unchallenged. Koppel's interview conformed to a larger pattern, a media frame described by the agricultural writer Ward Sinclair as "the popular image of the organic farmer as a freakish health-food nut who is checking out of the twentieth century."²⁰

Even though Alar coverage relentlessly focused upon the health dangers of one specific chemical and marginalized radical critiques of industrial agriculture, the crisis triggered increasing demand for organic produce, establishing a pattern that would be repeated in subsequent food scares. "Even today, the rapid growth of organic closely tracks consumers' rising worries about the conventional food supply," the writer Michael Pollan observed in 2001. "Every food scare is followed by a spike in organic sales." Often cited as a "watershed" in the history of organic food consumption, the Alar scare produced what *Newsweek* described as a "panic for organic."²¹

This consumerist response to the crisis marked an important example of what Andrew Szasz has termed the inverted quarantine approach to environmental problems. Spurred by environmental anxiety, in-

creasing numbers of primarily affluent Americans seek to protect their bodies from toxicity by turning to a wide range of consumer products. Green purchasing decisions promise "individualized acts of self-protection," a way for consumers to isolate themselves from escalating environmental risks. The inverted quarantine approach thus indicates the class-based limits of green consumerism. By privileging individual safety over collective reform, neoliberal environmentalism provides protection only to those who can afford it.²²

The Alar scare and the rise of green consumerism also worked to short-circuit time, to promise quick fixes to long-term problems. Consider the analysis offered by Dana Jackson, a co-founder of the Land Institute and a perceptive critic of industrial agriculture. While the episode "open[ed] an intense debate about . . . environmental risk," Jackson noted, it also obscured "the longer-term and systemic problems with agricultural chemicals in the environment" and ignored the broader "context of 'agribusiness,' the engine that drives so many American farms." The Alar scare thus followed a pattern set by media framings of *Silent Spring* and other pesticide debates. "Often such stories tend to make it seem as if, once some isolated problem has been fixed . . . , we can quit being concerned," Jackson continued. Focusing on specific dangers and short-term solutions, media imagery failed to grapple with the long-term destructive legacies of pesticide-dependent industrial agriculture.²³

NRDC director John H. Adams took a markedly different lesson from the Alar campaign, which he described as "one of the epochal moments in NRDC's history" that "catapulted us to a level of public recognition and credibility we had never dreamed of." He emphasized that Alar's demise resulted not from an EPA action but from Unilever's. "The most lasting influence from the Alar case was the lesson it taught us about how we could best protect the public and influence the behavior of industry," he explained. "NRDC would no longer focus only on government, law, and regulation. From now on, we would also look to the marketplace and the powerful force of consumer choice." Rather than relying exclusively on government action, the NRDC would now put its faith in green consumerism.²⁴

In the time leading up to Earth Day 1990, many other mainstream environmentalists would extol the beneficent power of the market, and would make individual consumer choice central to their vision of environmental sustainability. Besides the Alar case, they would point to other successful examples of consumer power, especially the boycott of

canned tuna, launched in 1988 to protest fishing practices that killed dolphins.

In promoting the tuna boycott, the environmental group Earth Island Institute evoked the charismatic appeal of the dolphin, a creature often celebrated by nature films and marine mammal parks for its "affectionate image" and "human-like intelligence." Through a series of full-page newspaper and magazine advertisements, the group urged consumers to help stop "the dolphin massacre" by refusing to buy canned tuna. Other visual media dramatically increased public awareness of the plight of "trapped, drowned, [and] mangled dolphins." Both ABC and CBS News broadcast disturbing video footage, taken by Sam Labudde, a scientist working undercover on a fishing vessel, of dolphins entangled in nets, "unable to breathe," "crying out," and eventually dying.²⁵

Even the Hollywood film *Lethal Weapon 2* (1989) inserted a save-the-dolphin message. In one scene the actor Danny Glover, playing the part of a police lieutenant, is chastised by his family as he prepares to eat a tuna fish sandwich. "Tuna!" his children yell, registering their shock. "Daddy, you can't eat tuna," one daughter informs him. "I can't eat what?" he responds incredulously. "We're boycotting tuna, honey," his wife explains, "because they kill the dolphins that get caught in the net."²⁶

A wide range of visual media—from surreptitiously obtained documentary footage to print media ads, TV news, and Hollywood film—all elicited sympathy for dolphins and helped persuade many viewers, including children and youth, to boycott tuna. Indeed, not just Danny Glover's fictional family, but actual schoolchildren across the United States badgered their parents, school boards, and leading tuna companies to stop the "dolphin slaughter." After seeing the Labudde video, one student organized his classmates to write postcards to Star-Kist executives. Ten days before Earth Day 1990, at a press conference announcing that the company "would no longer buy, process or sell tuna caught at the expense of dolphins," its president read a number of these postcards, including one that asked, "How can you sleep at night knowing your company is doing this?" While Streep and the NRDC called for the protection of children's vulnerable bodies, the tuna boycott galvanized children and youth as activists who urged corporations to adopt more sustainable practices. Following the Star-Kist announcement, other leading tuna companies soon declared that they also would stop buying tuna caught in nets that ensnared dolphins. These companies, according to *New York Times*, were simply respond-

ing to "market forces," since they "surely couldn't allow [Star-Kist] to stand alone as the dolphins' only corporate champion." The market thus seemed to empower consumers, to give them a voice in corporate policies. As one commentator gushed at the time, "It's consumer power that will change the world."²⁷

Both the Alar crisis and the tuna boycott would lend credence to the idea of green consumerism, and would provide hope that the capitalist market could mend its ecologically destructive ways. Yet these examples also revealed the limits to such a strategy for environmental politics. In each case, the visual media conveyed outrage and concern over a specific practice—the use of a particular chemical on one fruit, the type of nets used to catch one type of fish—to generate a sense of urgency and imply that if a particular practice were changed, then the crisis could be solved. For all their power to activate the emotions, for all their ability to document the environmental harm inflicted by a clearly identifiable agent, these visual symbols ignored the long-term ecological consequences produced by the structures of contemporary capitalism.

Even as they challenged corporate power, the Alar crisis and the tuna boycott reinforced the increasingly popular perception of the market as a frictionless, fast-moving realm that responded more quickly and effectively to citizen concerns than did the inefficient, red-taped domain of government. Indeed, the NRDC campaign against Alar was premised on the notion of EPA inertia, of bureaucratic delays that prevented the agency from banning this substance in a timely fashion. As we have seen, media coverage of environmental crises challenged the Reaganite faith in boundlessness and tempered the sense of limitless optimism that underwrote the antiregulatory agenda. Yet the legacies of these campaigns should not be understood within the narrow political frame of Republicans versus Democrats. The repeated emphasis upon green consumerist solutions to environmental problems instead demonstrates the increasing prominence of neoliberal citizenship practices. Propelled by media reports of Alar contamination and dolphin slaughter, consumers felt a profound sense of environmental anxiety and worried about the destructive impact of capitalist enterprise. These feelings, in turn, shaped their economic behavior, leading many Americans to stop buying apple products or to boycott tuna. The market's apparently rapid response—resulting in the end of Alar and the adoption of dolphin-safe nets—yielded important citizenship messages, suggesting that capitalism could redeem itself by attending to the environmental anxieties of consumers.

As Earth Day 1990 approached, green consumerism became central to popular expressions of environmentalism, and Hollywood would increasingly seem to align itself with the environmental movement. Much like the tuna boycott scene in *Lethal Weapon 2*, ecological messages would appear in numerous TV shows. Newspapers and popular magazines would profile the actions of an array of celebrity environmentalists: Sting, Madonna, and the Grateful Dead performing benefit concerts for the rainforests; Tom Cruise and others speaking at Earth Day rallies; and, of course, Streep warning about the Alar menace. "The '90s are the years for the environment," *USA Today* noted. "Ever wary of where the spotlight is shining at the moment, the glitterati are all but turning green as they realize the best place to be is marching in the environmental parade." Even as the mass media emphasized celebrity involvement in the movement, even as the presence of popular entertainers enhanced the newsworthiness of the environmental cause, this same coverage implied that the stars were merely "jumping on the bandwagon" and, as one critic put it, turning "political 'beliefs'" into "another consumer good." The crisis temporality of the media, together with the perceived trendiness of celebrities, concentrated public attention on environmental issues but often presented the movement as nothing more than a fashionable way of feeling and an enlightened form of consumption.²⁸

Only a few weeks after Streep became an environmental celebrity, TV news, popular magazines, and other media would be filled with shocking pictures of the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill. As audiences glimpsed birds, otters, and other creatures suffering and dying, as they witnessed Alaskan beaches blackened by oil, many felt intense sadness for the threatened wildlife and visceral anger at the corporation and the reputedly drunk captain. Even more than the Alar crisis, the *Exxon Valdez* spill conformed to event-driven patterns of media temporality to make this particular episode seem uniquely catastrophic. As oil spill imagery unleashed feelings of sadness and anger, as more celebrities proclaimed their commitment to the cause, environmentalism became increasingly prominent in American public life. Yet many activists still wondered whether media cycles—and the visual emphasis on sudden environmental devastation—would ultimately work to advance or thwart their agenda.

The Sudden Violence of the *Exxon Valdez*

In late March 1989 Tony Dawson, a professional nature photographer, suddenly felt like a war photographer instead. On assignment for *Audubon* magazine, Dawson flew in a helicopter above the grounded *Exxon Valdez* supertanker as it spewed millions of gallons of oil into Alaska's Prince William Sound. "The experience was unsettling," Dawson wrote, "but distantly so, like viewing television news reports of a foreign disaster. From above, the spreading crude and its coastal impact were impossible to judge." While the aerial view provided a broad, panoramic perspective on the spill, Dawson wanted to use his camera to document in a closer, more intimate fashion the violence inflicted upon the region's environment. As he surveyed "the depth of the sound's wounds," Dawson felt "numbed by shock and sorrow." "During four days on the Barren Islands," he explained, "we found no live, oiled birds while counting nearly two thousand corpses deposited by the tides. . . . For two depressing days we heard the wet 'thunk' of steel against meat and bone as . . . crews used gaff hooks to gather bodies. . . . The spill created a growing war zone, every day a new beachhead, every night a new body count."¹

Dawson's photograph of a dead sea otter became one of the most widely seen images of the disaster (fig. 14.1). He found the animal washed ashore, "posed grotesquely" with its "paws curled against its chest [and] teeth bared." Dawson's close attention to the victim's bodily features